



YOUTH WITHOUT OLD AGE AND LIFE WITHOUT DEATH



CRITERION
PUBLISHING

YOUTH WITHOUT OLD AGE
AND
LIFE WITHOUT DEATH

A ROMANIAN FAIRY TALE

Retold by GABRIEL STANESCU

Illustrated by AUREL IONESCU

Translated from Romanian

by MAC LINSOTT RICKETTS



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Criterion Publishing Co., Inc.

P. O. Box 930698

Norcross, Georgia 30093

Manufactured in the United States of America

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1. Fairy tales
2. Folklore - Romania

ISBN 1-887304-00-2

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 95-068924

Computer editing Paul Chiru



Once upon a time there lived a great emperor and empress. They were both young and handsome, but they were very sad because no children had been born to them. They went to wizards¹ and wise men who could read the stars, to see if they were destined to have children, but it was in vain. At last, hearing that there was a clever old man living in a nearby village, the emperor summoned him to come to the palace. But the old man replied that those who needed his help must come to him. What could they do but go? Taking with them a few boyars², soldiers, and servants, they journeyed to the old man's house.

When he saw them from afar, he came out and greeted them with these words: "Welcome and good health! What is it you seek, Your Highnesses? The thing you wish will but bring you grief!"

"I have not come to ask for grief," said the emperor, "but only this: if you possess any medicines that will enable us to have children, please give me some."

"Such medicines I have indeed," the old man replied, "but

¹ A man with supernatural wisdom or magical powers.

² A member of the old Romanian nobility, a lord.

only one child shall be born to you. His name will be Prince Charming, but he will not bring you great happiness.”

Ignoring the old man’s last words, the emperor and empress returned joyfully to the palace, and a few days later the empress sensed she had conceived. The whole kingdom and all the royal court and the servants rejoiced at the news.

But as the hour of his birth drew near, the unborn child started crying, and no wizard was able to calm him. Then the emperor began to promise him all the good things in the world, but not even in this way could he make the child cease his tears.

“Be quiet, my little one,” said the emperor, “and I will give you such and such a kingdom! Be quiet, my son, and I will give you for a wife the daughter of such and such king!”

When he saw that the unborn child was still crying, the emperor said, “Be quiet, little son, and I will give you **youth without old age and life without death!**”

At that, the baby stopped crying and was born. The emperor’s servants beat the drums and blew the trumpets to announce the birth of the royal heir, and throughout the land there was rejoicing for a whole week.



As the child grew, he became more clever and more daring. His parents sent him to schools and to learned men, and all the studies that took other children a year to learn, he mastered in a month. The emperor felt as though he had died and risen again, so happy was he. The whole kingdom boasted that it would have a ruler as wise and rich as Solomon.

Yet after a while the boy became melancholic and pensive. On his fifteenth birthday, when the emperor was dining with all the boyars and lords of the empire, Prince Charming rose to his feet and spoke.

“Father, the time has come for you to give me what you promised me at my birth!”

On hearing this, the emperor grew sad and said, “That may be, my son, but how can I give you such an unheard of thing? If I promised you then **youth without old age and life without death**, it was just to soothe you, to make you stop crying.”

“If you, Father, cannot give me what you promised, then I must roam the face of the whole earth until I find the prize for which I came into this world!”

“Your father is old now,” said the boyars. “We will raise you to the throne, and we will give you for your wife the most beautiful empress to be found under the sun!”



But it was impossible for him to turn back from his decision, and his father, seeing he was resolved to go, gave him his blessing and ordered the servants to prepare food and all the other things the boy would need for his journey.

Then Prince Charming went to the stables where the finest thoroughbred stallions in the realm were kept, in order to choose one for his mount, but none of them pleased him. Then he saw in a corner a skinny, neglected nag, covered with sores. When he laid his hand on its mane, the horse turned his head and said:

“What is your command, Master? Thank God for helping me, for sending a hero like you to put me to the test!”

Prince Charming told him what he had in mind to do, and the horse replied:

“If you would have your desire fulfilled, you must ask your father to give you his broadsword and lance, his bow and quiver of arrows, and the clothing he wore when he was a youth; and you must take care of me yourself for six weeks, and feed me on barley boiled in milk.”

After rummaging through old trunks for three days and



nights, Prince Charming finally found his father's old weapons and clothing. When he had cleaned them of rust and dirt, the horse shook himself and all the scabs fell off, leaving him just as his mother had borne him: sleek and with four wings. Seeing him suddenly transformed, Prince Charming said to him: "In three days we shall leave."

On the morning of the third day all the court and all the kingdom were filled with sorrow. Prince Charming, dressed as a hero, with the sword in his hand, mounted the horse he had chosen, bade farewell to the emperor, the empress, and all the courtiers, who, with tears in their eyes begged him to give up the idea of the journey, fearing that it could lead to the loss of his life. But he, putting the spurs to his horse, dashed out of the gate like the wind, followed by several carts carrying food and money, and nearly two hundred soldiers whom the emperor had ordered to accompany him.

After he passed the borders of his father's kingdom and had reached the wasteland, Prince Charming divided all his goods among the soldiers and sent them back, retaining for himself only as much of the food as the horse could carry.



And heading east, he traveled for three days and three nights until he arrived at an open field littered with a multitude of human bones.

Stopping to rest, the horse said to him, "This, Master, is the estate of the Woodpecker Woman who is so evil that no one can set foot on her lands without paying with his life. She was once an ordinary woman, but her parents, whom she would not obey, cursed her to be transformed into a woodpecker. She is with her children just now, but tomorrow she will come to destroy you. She is terribly big, but do not fear; just be ready to shoot her with the bow and arrows, and keep the sword and lance handy to use if need be."

The next day, at dawn, Prince Charming and his horse prepared to pass through the forest. Soon they heard a terrible knocking sound. The horse spoke:

"Get ready, Master: the Woodpecker Woman is coming!"

And indeed she came, with such speed that trees in her path were felled. The horse flew up above her, because he was winged, and Prince Charming shot off one of her legs. When he was about to shoot her with another arrow, the Woodpecker Woman cried out:

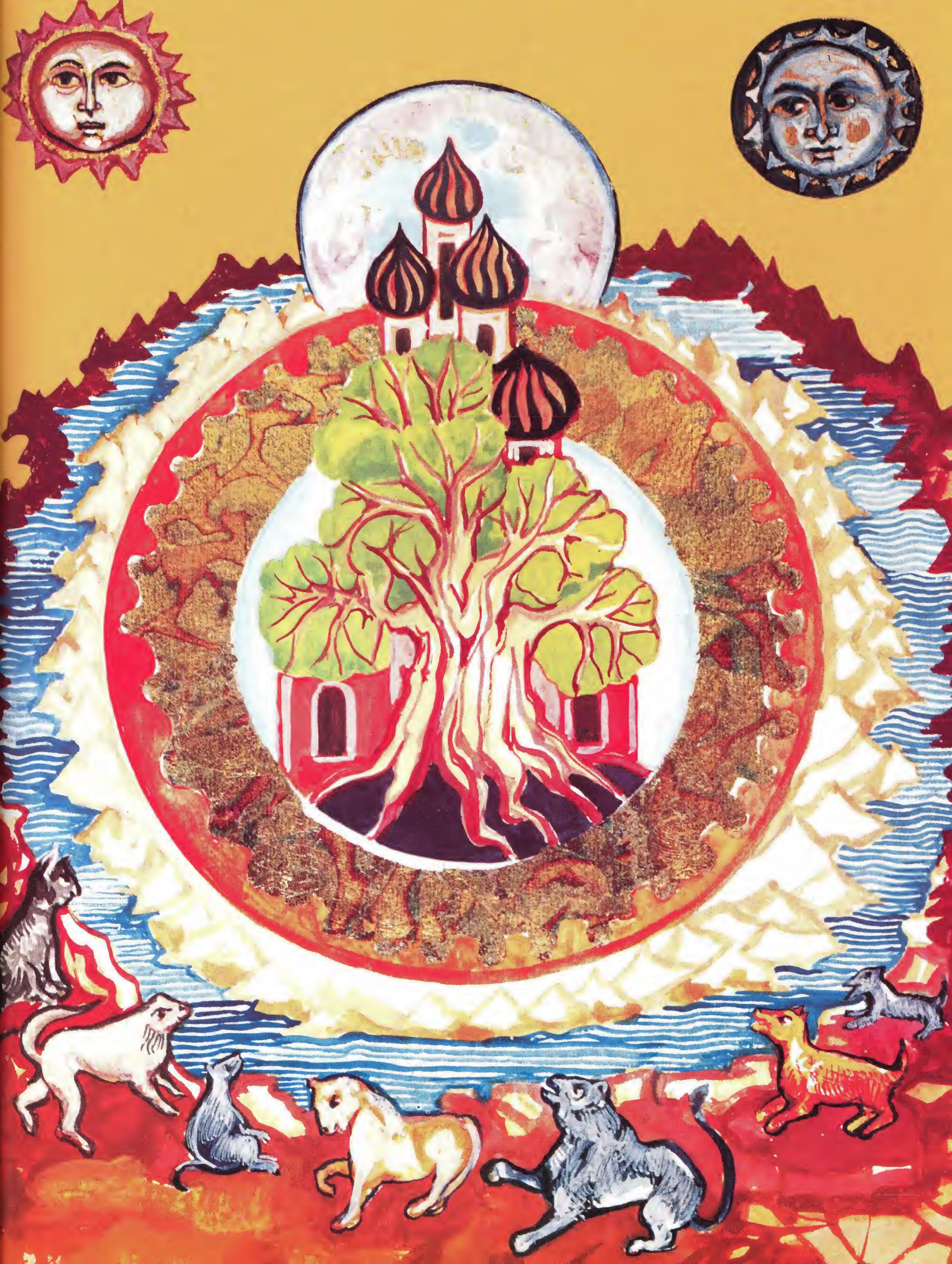


“Stop! Prince Charming, I’ll do you no harm. You are the first man to have defeated me: before today no mortal has ever dared to cross my borders; those few fools who have ventured to try it only made it to the field where you saw all those bones.”

The Woodpecker Woman took Prince Charming to her house and treated him as an honored guest. But when they were at the table, she groaned with pain, and Prince Charming drew from his knapsack her leg which he had been saving, and put it in place, healing her. For joy, the Woodpecker Woman kept up the feasting for three days and begged Prince Charming to choose one of her three daughters, beautiful as fairy princesses, for his wife. He, however, refused her saying that he had come seeking **youth without old age and lifewithout death**. At that, she said:

“With that horse of yours and with your courage, I believe you will find what you are seeking.”

After three more days they prepared to travel again. Prince Charming rode on and on, farther and farther; and when they had passed over the borders of the Woodpecker Woman’s land, they came upon a beautiful field where flowers were blooming on one side while on the other the grass was scorched.



Prince Charming asked his horse, "Why is this grass all burnt?" And the horse replied:

"We have come to the estate of the Scorpion Woman, sister of the Woodpecker Woman. These two are so wicked that they cannot live together; their parents' curse turned them into inhuman creatures, as you see. Their hatred for each other is dreadful. When the Scorpion Woman is angry, she spews out fire and pitch. Probably she had a quarrel with her sister and, coming to chase her off her land, she burned up the grass where she passed. This one is worse than the Woodpecker Woman, and she has three heads!"

While they were talking, the Scorpion Woman, with one jaw high in the air and one on the earth and emitting flames from her mouth, approached them as fast as the wind. The horse rose above her, and Prince Charming shot her so skillfully that one of her heads flew off. When he was about to shoot off another head, the Scorpion Woman, weeping, begged him to forgive her. In order to convince him that it was no trick, she swore him an oath, written with her own blood. She entertained him as her sister had done, but more grandly, and



he gave her back her head that he had cut off with his arrow. After three days he departed.

Passing beyond the realm of the Scorpion Woman, he traveled on and on until he arrived at a field full of flowers where it was always springtime.

“So far, so good, Master,” said the horse, “but we have one more obstacle to pass. We are going to confront a great danger, and if God will help us safely through this one too, then we shall be heroes! A little farther on from here is the palace where **youth without old age and life without death** dwells. Therefore, we must try, if we can, to leap over them.”

After resting two days and making preparations again, the horse, taking a deep breath, said:

“Master, sit tight in the saddle and hold onto my mane!” In the next minute they were high above the forest. “Master,” the horse continued, “this is the time of the day when the animals are fed, and they are all gathered in the palace courtyard.”

Rising higher they saw the palace, gleaming. So bright it was that, though one might look at the sun, at the palace one could not. Just as they were descending and about to land on



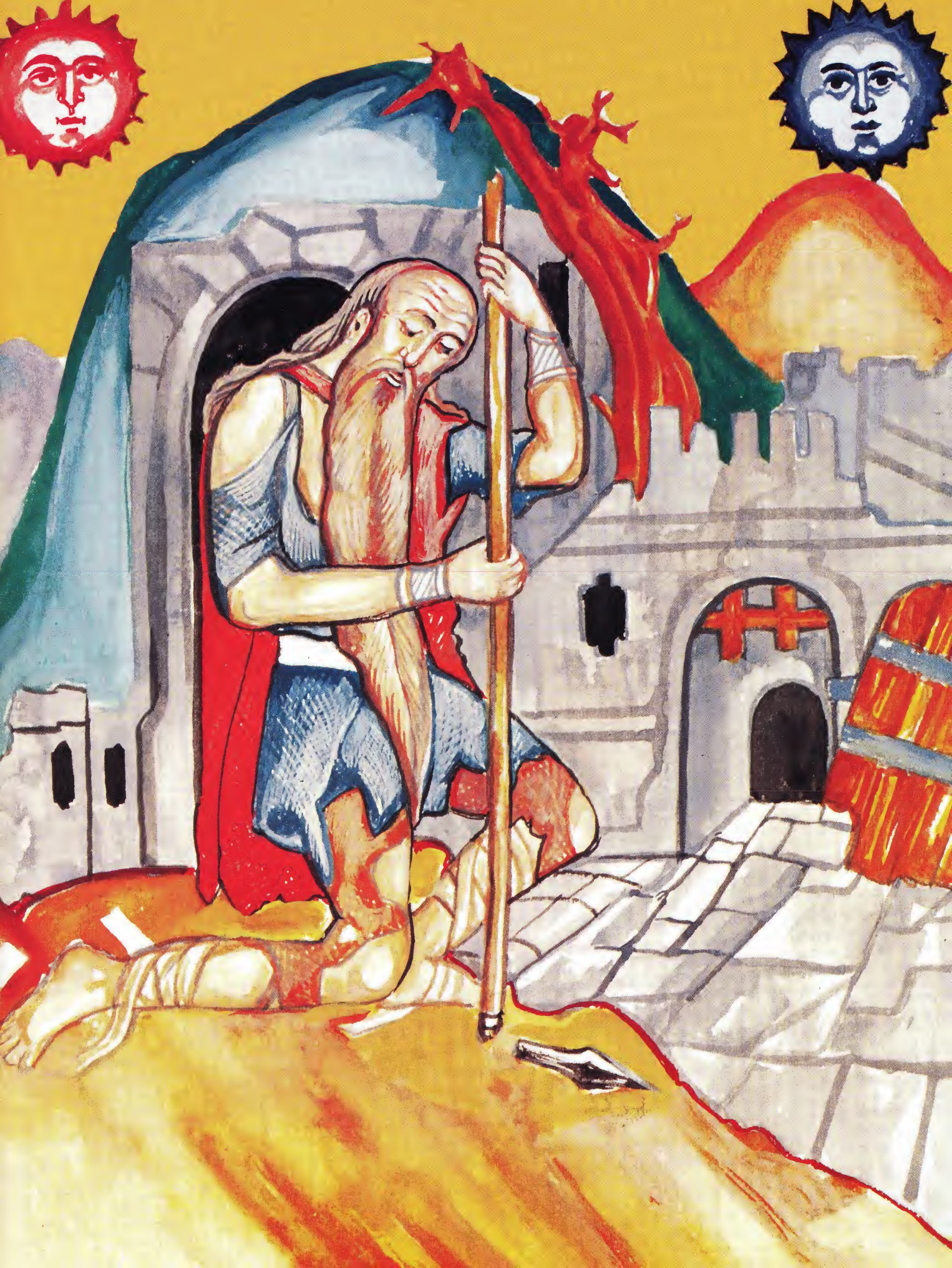
the palace steps, Prince Charming touched the top of a tree with his foot, and suddenly the whole forest was set in motion. The howling of the beasts was frightful, and if the lady of the palace had not been outside feeding her “chickens” (as she called the animals of the forest), the two most certainly would have perished. Overjoyed that they had come, she saved them, because she had never before seen a human being in that place. So she restrained the wild animals, calmed them, and sent them to their places. The mistress was a fairy, tall, slender, and extraordinarily beautiful. When he saw her, Prince Charming stood transfixed. She spoke to him:

“Welcome, Prince Charming! What are you seeking here?”

“We seek **youth without old age and life without death.**”

“If you are seeking what you say, it is here!”

So he dismounted and entered the palace. And there he saw two more women, one younger than the other; they were the elder sisters of the first fairy. These two, for joy, prepared a delicious dinner and served it in dishes all of gold. The horse they let loose to graze at will; and later they introduced them



both to the wild animals so they could go about freely in the forest.

The women besought Prince Charming to stay with them forever, because they had been living all alone. Little by little they became accustomed to one another. He told them the story of what had happened to him before he had arrived there, and after a while he married the youngest girl. The mistress of the house gave him permission to go about in the surrounding area, except for one place, the Valley of Tears. She warned him not to go there, because to do so would not be good for him.

Prince Charming stayed there heedless of time, not realizing how it was passing, since he remained as young as he was when he had come. He lived in peace and tranquility with his wife and sisters-in-law, enjoying the beauty of the flowers and the sweetness and purity of the air. Oftentimes he went out hunting, but one day, chasing a hare, he strayed without realizing it into the Valley of Tears.

When he returned home with his prey, he was suddenly seized by homesickness, with a yearning for his father and

mother, but he did not dare confess this to the women. They, however, realized it from the sadness and restlessness that they read in his face.

“Oh, unhappy one! You have been to the Valley of Tears!” they said, greatly alarmed.

“I went there, my dear ones, without meaning to do that stupid thing; and now I am consumed with longing for my parents. And yet I cannot bear to leave you! So I will go to see my parents one last time, and then I shall return to you, never to leave again.”

“Don’t leave us, beloved! Your parents have been dead for hundreds of years, and if you go, we fear you will never return. Stay with us, for, if not, something tells us you will perish!”

But the entreaties of the three women could not take away the yearning for his parents. At last, the horse said to him:

“If you won’t listen to me, Master, whatever happens to you will be your fault alone. I will carry you back, but when we arrive at your father’s palace, I will return, even if you remain there only an hour.”

So they bade one another farewell and Prince Charming

set off on the horse, leaving the women weeping. They arrived at the place where the estate of the Scorpion Woman had been and found there cities; the forests had been changed into fields. Asking one person and another about the Scorpion Woman, they were told that their grandparents had heard their great-grandparents telling stories about such nonsense.

“How can that be?” Prince Charming asked, amazed. “It seems like only the day before yesterday that I passed through here!” And the people laughed at him as if he were delirious or dreaming with open eyes. Angry, he went on his way, not noticing that his hair and beard had turned white.

Arriving at the Woodpecker Woman’s estate, he asked this one and that about her, but he received the same kinds of answers. He could not understand how things could have changed so much in just a few days’ time. And angry again, he left with his white beard down to his waist, sensing a trembling in his legs.

He came to his father’s kingdom. Here he found different people, different towns, and even the oldest things were so changed that he no longer recognized them. At last he reached the palace where he had been born. When he dismounted, the horse said to him:



“Farewell, Master; I must return to the place we left. If you want to go too, mount me at once, and we’ll be off!”

“Farewell! I hope to return soon myself!”

Seeing the palace buildings all in ruins he sighed, and with tears in his eyes he tried to recall how bright they had been only a little while ago, and how he had spent his childhood in them. He walked around the main building several times, searching every room; every nook and cranny reminded him of the past, including the stable where he had found the horse. He descended into the cellar and, scarcely able to walk now, he found nothing but an old bejeweled chest. He opened it but found it empty. He lifted the cover of an inner compartment, and an unearthly voice spoke to him:

“It’s a good thing you’ve come; if you’d tarried much longer I’d have perished myself!”

And with that, Death slapped his face. His skin had become so dried that he collapsed suddenly, not breathing, and turned to dust.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

AUREL IONESCU

The Romanian-born painter, Aurel Ionescu, is living now in northern Italy, at Marchirolo. He learned the technique of icon painting on wood at the Plumbuita Monastery in Bucharest. After a long time of deep questioning and soul-searching, his life and activities became permanently marked by the sign of the icon.

Aurel Ionescu has held many exhibits of his works in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. At the opening of each of his exhibitions, he introduces his icons as the product of a unique, personal experience.

In order to illustrate this book, the artist used symbols from Romanian mythology, transposed and arranged according to the stylistic criteria of Byzantine painting.

MAC LINSOTT RICKETTS

From 1971 to 1995 Mac Linscott Ricketts was Professor of Religion at Louisburg College in North Carolina. Previously, he taught religion at Duke University in North Carolina and at Millikin University in Illinois.

He is the author of an impressive monograph on the early life of the world-famous writer and historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, also of Romanian origin, under whom he studied at the University of Chicago. In order to be able to read Eliade's extensive Romanian oeuvre, Professor

Ricketts taught himself Romanian. He has published an important part of that oeuvre in English translation and hopes to publish more.

GABRIEL STANESCU

Gabriel Stanescu, formerly of Bucharest, is the author of three books of poetry (in Romanian), many essays, and numerous literary articles published in Romanian periodicals. After the Romanian Revolution of 1989, he was for a time Editor-in-Chief of *Criterion*, a magazine for the arts, literature, and philosophy. In 1991 he emigrated with his family to the United States, settling near Atlanta, Georgia. At present he is working on a collection of “scary stories” from Transylvania and another book about Dracula for Criterion Publishing.

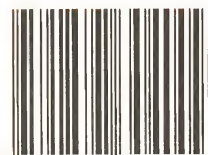


"Youth without Old Age and Life without Death" is one of the most exquisite Romanian folk tales. It was first collected and published by Petre Ispirescu at the end of the nineteenth century.

Ever since his birth the prince in this fairy tale desired eternal youth, but, because his father could not offer it to him, he assumed the risk of looking for it himself, facing countless dangers. In the end he succeeded in finding youth without old age and so he lived happily in a world in which time was not measured by our ordinary units. However, just when he thought he had found happiness, he stepped into the real world and he became the person he had been before: a human being with feelings, exposed to error, obeying his heart rather than his reason. That is why he became homesick and wanted to go back to see his parents and the place where he had spent his childhood. But to his amazement he realized, not unlike Rip Van Winkle, that a hundred years had passed since he left to look for youth without old age. Everything was changed: his parents had been dead a long time and the castle was in ruins. He himself lost his immortality, getting older and older like any mortal.

Gabriel Stanescu

U.S. \$9.95 CAN \$13.25



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ISBN 1-887304-00-2